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C O N F I D E N T I A L SANTO DOMINGO 002026

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR WHA/CAR, EB/TRA; DEPT PASS DEPT OF TRANSPORTATION
AND FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATION

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/31/2008

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SUBJECT: DOMINICAN GOVERNMENT LOCKS OUT AIR TRAFFIC
CONTROLLERS, MILITARIZES SERVICES

REF: SANTO DOMINGO 1873 (NOTAL)

Classified By: DCM Lisa Kubiske. Reason: 1.5 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) At 0600 this morning March 31 Civil Aviation officials replaced civilian air traffic controllers at the national center (SDQ) with military air traffic controllers. The military controllers are instituting precautionary intervals for incoming, departing, and overhead traffic; some flights are currently delayed up to 2 hours in departing from Santo Domingo.

¶2. (U) Civilian air traffic controllers have been negotiating for pay rises, with their request being for a 100 percent increase. Bolivar Deleon, president of their association, told Ecopol counselor that their last salary increase was in 1997. Newspapers had carried comment that the civilian controllers had been warning of demonstration measures, probably ten-minute delays for all flights, to be initiated this weekend, in advance of Easter week.

¶3. (SBU) American Airlines country manager Eduardo Delpozo confirmed at noon that traffic was moving normally, although with delays. No flights have been cancelled. All airports outside Santo Domingo are regularly staffed by military controllers, so their situation is unchanged. Delpozo notes that there are fewer military controllers than civilians, but he has heard that the government may be getting supplementary military staff from Mexico or Panama.

¶4. (C) The Ambassador raised the subject during a call on President Mejia at 1 p.m., and Mejia confirmed the action. "We have just trained twenty-one new air controllers, with U.S. help." He was dismissive of the civilian controllers' demands. "They make more than I do, and they're asking for double their salaries."

¶5. (SBU) Deleon told Ecopol counselor that the locked-out controllers are seeking an intermediary with the government. He hopes to convince businessman Frank Ranieri to take their side. Deleon stressed that the six-person team at the SDQ center is handling work usually done by a staff of twenty, and he said that none of the center's technical staff was on shift to deal with maintenance or systems problems.

¶6. (SBU) Comment. It appears that the government can manage the air traffic control system and that this dispute can be resolved, although probably with little or no extra pay for the controllers. There is a much more limited labor dispute than the persistent action undertaken by government-employed physicians, where Mejia recently secured a truce with his promise to talk after Easter. Given the financial and fiscal crisis -- and the IMF program -- the government has essentially no resources to meet salary demands for either group. Mejia was not particularly interested in talking about the dispute with the air traffic controllers, except to make a reference to President Reagan's decision to replace striking U.S. controllers in the 1980's. And assuming that the government does have sufficient military staff to operate the SDQ center, a show of decisiveness would probably do him no harm in the current presidential campaign.

HERTELL